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BANNOCKBURN — The doctor shortage in southern Illinois is well-known but northern Illinois is facing the same crisis, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, said Monday.

Kirk is launching a "Keep Doctors in Illinois" wristband campaign to call attention to the shortage.

"Access to care is not just a problem in southern Illinois," he said in a statement and press conference at the Bannockburn Mediplex on Waukegan Road. "Northern Illinois is feeling an impact as neurosurgeons, obstetricians and emergency room doctors move to bordering states that have passed medical liability reforms."

Physicians in key specialties — obstetricians, neurosurgeons and emergency care — are leaving the Chicago suburbs because of rising insurance costs, Kirk said.

Illinois has been placed on the the National Warning List for declining access to health care by the American Medical Association, he noted.

Three physicians, Dr. Jonathan Citow who, Kirk said, is Lake County's only practicing neurosurgeon, Dr. Jay Alexander, a partner in North Shore Cardiologists, and Dr. Brian Locker, an obstetrician at Lutheran General Hospital, Park Ridge, joined the congressman in Bannockburn.

Citow said he cannot bring a partner in to join his practice because of insurance costs. "I've attempted to bring in world class neurosurgeons several times to join my practice but all of them have declined citing the unfriendly climate facing doctors in Illinois," he said in a statement.

Alexander said young doctors are being driven from Illinois because of high malpractice insurance premiums. "I recently lost a partner to Milwaukee Heart Hospital," he said. Alexander said the partner's insurance dropped from \$100,000 to \$30,000 with the move.

"The largest obstetrician practice at Lutheran General Hospital shut their doors last month and moved their practice to Kenosha," Locker said. "Our patients need to understand that if no medical malpractice reforms are enacted, in due time, there will be no doctors practicing ... in Illinois."

To date, 25 states have enacted reforms, Kirk said. "The failure by our state leaders to enact such reforms is forcing the federal government to take action," he said.

The U.S. House has twice passed reform legislation that included caps on non-economic damages but the measures have failed in the U.S. Senate. Kirk said he is hopeful the legislation, called the Help, Efficient, Accessible, Low Cost, Timely Healthcare (HEALTH) Act will pass the third time around.

The legislation is being introduced by Congressman Chris Cox, R-Calif., and cosponsored by Kirk.

Illinois is especially vulnerable to losing doctors because it borders three "reform state," Wisconsin, Indiana and Missouri, Kirk said.

The average neurosurgeon in Illinois pays more than four times the amount for malpractice insurance than a neurosurgeon in Wisconsin, he said.

"Despite our state-of-the-art hospitals, we cannot care for patients in Illinois without doctors," Kirk said. "If we do not enact reforms soon, patients will die ... I urge Illinois residents to call on their U.S. senators to support the HEALTH act when it reaches the Senate."

The "Keep Doctors in Illinois" waistbands are free and can be obtained by calling the Lake County Medical Society, 847-482-0222, in Lake Forest.